CHAPTER II

THE ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY OF THE AL-QASR AREA

Changing Patterns of Land Use

131 Al-Qasr is located in the Northwestern Coastal Zone, a relatively fertile littoral region forming the northern edge of the Egyptian Western Desert. Extending from Alexandria to Sallum on the Libyan border, the Zone is some 500 kilometers in length and reaches south into the desert some 20 to 50 •134 kilometers. A deep soil deposit and a relatively high average 132 rainfall of about 15 centimeters (20 centimeters of rain would 241 be considered "high") permit limited agriculture in this region.

133 Due to the drainage pattern of the coastal area there is a fair supply of underground water. The rain percolates [172] down through coastal sand dunes and is trapped in man-made underground galleries dating from Roman times. Farther into 312 the desert, cisterns, which also date from Roman times, catch the rains draining off the Libyan plateau to the south. This plateau and the catchment area form the southern boundary of the greater al-Qasr settlement area (see Figure 4). The General Desert Development Authority, an agency of the government, estimates that there are about 3,000 of these

3:Evans-Pritchard E-4, 5 (1942-1944) 1949 MT9 Libyan Bedouin MT9
(1837-1942) Sanusi

137 of country. The whitish soils of the steppe support worts and
[134] other scrub bushes and some drought-resisting trees in the beds of wadis and they are well covered with annual and perennial grasses and other plants which yield excellent pasturage in the
[233] springtime. However, except in the Wadi al-Mra, where camels can be kept the year round, there is little grazing beyond the line Msus–Bir Tinjidhir–Bir Hakaim.

233 The Bedouin of the forest area are essentially a goat people,
137 though they also keep many sheep and cattle, and it is mostly through the medium of the goat that the vast natural wealth of the forests of Cyrenaica is transformed into human wealth. The animal is hardy and frugal, and has the great merit of preferring tree and shrub to grass and of being a catholic feeder. Just as the forest would be useless to the Bedouin without the goat so the much vaster stretches of steppe would be useless to them without the sheep and camel which turn its grasses and
233 scrub into food. Thus Cyrenaica is fundamentally a pastoral
[181] country, primarily a country of sheep farming, and its people, as they say themselves, have the hearts of shepherds and not of peasants. While agriculture and pastoralism are both practised, the bias of nature and tradition is towards animal husbandry, by which the rich vegetation of the country is turned into milk, butter, meat, wool, hides, and draught and transport.

II

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221 In Cyrenaica stand always contrasted the mountain and the
233 plain, the forest and the steppe, the red soils and the white, the region of goats and cows and the region of sheep and camels, settled life and nomadism.

221 True nomadism is very rare. A few Fawakhir, Minifa, Huta,
233 and other tribal fragments herd only camels, or if they possess other animals keep them with kinsmen near the plateau, and can therefore wander pretty well where they please. They may be found anywhere between the Nile, Fazzan, and the Sudan. Their spirit is that of an Aulad 'Ali tribesman who said to me: 'We call no place our home. It is wherever there is grass and water.' Semi-nomads are numerous. Those with land on the
[241] plateau cultivate there, then graze southwards, and return again to the plateau in the dry season to water their flocks.

4: Peters E-5 (1948-1950) 1970 MT9 Libyan Bedouin MT9
Cyrenaica

At the next level of segmentation (this now being the tertiary order in any given tribe) the number of segments which appear is conspicuously irregular. For the Magharba tribe, the four secondary segments, 'Ali, Mansur, Subh and Nasr are divided into thirteen, six, four, and four segments respectively. Similar irregularity appears in other tribes.[11] The pattern of the genealogy is always one of regularity in the number of segments at all points in it except for the point of tertiary segmentation where conspicuous irregularity becomes immediately evident. Since these segments constitute the summer camps of the Bedouin, this is not surprising, for these small groups will show greater susceptibility to details of local water supplies, pasturing facilities, ploughland areas, and topographical features than would the numerically larger and structurally superior groups occupying larger areas of territories of greater ecological importance. If we follow the line from Sa'ada to Nasr again, the bifurcation at the first order of segmentation is consistent with the division of the country into the permanently green high altitudes of the plateau, and the extended low-lying plain area of the western half of the country. Between the territory of the Magharba tribe ('The White Plain') and that of its neighbour tribe, the 'Awaqir ('The Red Plain'), there is a major soil difference, which is such a conspicuous feature of the landscape, and so sharply defined, that one is almost aware when one has crossed the tribal boundary. Within the Magharba tribe, a prominent dry river valley cuts the territory in two, the landscape to the west of it being characteristically serrated, making travel in an east-west direction difficult, while to the east the landscape is much more docile and undulating. The four sections of the ash-Shamakh branch again represent four quite distinct areas. The territory of one section is almost conterminous with the narrow belt of sand dunes along the coast; the territory of another is a block of rough and tumbled land in the west; the territory of a third, in the centre, is made up of a few low-lying shallow valleys; and the territory of the fourth,

[11] It is necessary here to warn the reader that, brilliant an ethnographer as Agostini undoubtedly was, his grouping of tribal sections is not always correct. I had his book (Agostini 1922–23) with me in the field and checked his tribal survey. I found that at several important points his ordering of the segments was incorrect. I should add that the differences between Agostini and myself are not due to the kind of changes discussed in this article.